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RELIGIOUS LIFE AT AMHERST

PROFESSOR JOHN FRANKLIN GENUNG, PH.D., D.D.
Amherst College, Amherst, Mass.

Two embarrassing problems confront me as I essay to describe the religious life in Amherst College. The first and more formidable comes from the baffling difficulty, not to say futility, of putting into categorical terms a thing which, in proportion as it is inward and genuine, is too reticent to respond to the rude invasion of analysis and statistics. One must be involved in the hidden spirit of such life to feel its values; and even then one's reply to curious inquiries must be much like the answer once made to a request for a definition of some great elemental truth, "I know when you do not ask me." The other rises from the fact that Mr. Fitch, in his article on "Religious Life at Harvard,"¹ has described conditions so similar to those at Amherst that we could almost take his account for ours, changing merely the names and some details about methods and appliances. The problem left to me, accordingly, is largely that of making an acceptable variation on a theme already so ably handled.

For the similarity of conditions at Harvard and Amherst, and indeed in all the New England colleges, it is not hard to account. The bewildering changes of religious sentiment during the last half-century have not changed the essential fiber of the New England mind. We still inherit the vital breath of New England Puritanism; we are still heirs of that New England conscience which, however uncomfortable a thing to have in the house, will not consent to die out of the age without rendering strict account. Our students come indeed from all sections of the country, where all varieties of religious doctrine prevail; but in great proportion they trace proudly to New England ancestry, and coming here to college is like coming to headquarters, to the old-home atmosphere. An influence not easy to describe, deriving from a sturdy past,

¹ The *Biblical World*, March, 1912, p. 151.

and steadfast under the shifting tides of thought and criticism, a kind of rock-bottom which goes unmentioned simply because it is taken for granted, may be felt, and strongly, by a wise and sympathetic "discerner of spirits." I am inclined to think that in these times of unrest we do not sufficiently reckon with the sub-conscious element of religion. We see the agitation and get scared because our grandmothers (of both sexes) are, and we lose our heads; or else we try to carry off our brand-new views in an uneasy bravado; and so we forget, for the time being, that these estranging waves of doctrine are after all on the surface, while the ocean of religious faith and character, as defined in Christian terms (and these among the newest), is nineteen centuries old.

A time of religious and philosophical stress, such as the last fifty years have been undergoing, must necessarily be a time to try men's souls. How deep its influence is, or how pervasive, does not appear in men's demeanor or conversation; for we know how instructive is the impulse to hide or disguise one's most sacred feelings. I sometimes think that such a season of stress, imposed by the unescapable spirit of the age, is the modern equivalent of persecution. It is a test of the stuff that is in a man; and it leaves him, to the degree in which it has laid hold on him, either a craven or a martyr. But this tribute is due to our wholesomely earnest time, that the martyrdom it induces is made forever honorable: it is divested of its grewsome connotations and reverts to the original idea of steadfast witness-bearing. And its most fundamental element, perhaps, is simple staying-power; the oracle of Habakkuk, that the righteous shall live in his faithfulness, is realized anew. In this, too, the grounded spirit of race and place has its part; an inherited idea, long ago planted in faith, is sub-consciously working there.

For the forms and services of religion at Amherst, we may best bear in mind, perhaps, with necessary modifications, the simple usages of the New England parish church; not unmindful of the fact that in its noble day it was the unquestioned arbiter, in matters spiritual, alike of family and community. We have not jumped hastily to conclude that its day is past; nor have we grasped feverishly to adopt innovations without having a clear

idea not only what to free ourselves *from* but what new thing to commit ourselves *to*. "No man having drunk old wine desireth new; for he saith, 'The old is good.'" At the same time, I am persuaded this calm conservatism is by no means synonymous with stagnation, or what uneasy critics call "cold storage." The agencies of religious expression are there: as sound, as vital, as adequate, as they have ever been; it remains merely for the individual soul to appropriate them. Accordingly, we retain the daily chapel service, with required attendance, corresponding to the old New England family worship, but projected to the college scale; we have the college church, with attendance also required, at which preachers from prominent pulpits of the land, of various denominations and in generous proportion alumni of Amherst, bring from the greater world the spirit of the cause they have at heart, as adapted to the mind and ideals of young men. Quite generally these ministers, in addition to their pulpit services, are called upon by the students themselves to address them more informally in some of the public rooms of the college, or to visit groups of students in their fraternity homes. Such is the simple machinery of our religious activities; in which while administrative prescription maintains the same responsibility as in other matters, free and full scope is open to student initiative. And the student initiative is as wholesomely taken as accorded: a leavening influence in the student body, and productive of much light and inspiration from the men of noble leading whom we are privileged to hear and with whom we may converse. From their places on the firing-line of the world's battle they come, just as men of other callings come from theirs, and we avail ourselves according to our good will of their wisdom and uplift.

Of course, where religious observances are prescribed, and especially if these are outside the Episcopal or Catholic order, they must be exposed to the unconsidered and more or less ephemeral fluctuations of student sentiment, which moves so easily to the spiritual ebbs and flows of the times. If in the general tone of things the student mood becomes a little soured or staled, the required religious attendance is one of the surest things to take its attack. It is a very convenient college barometer. Its vulnerable

point is so obvious; you can hit it with your eyes shut and your reason quite in abeyance. Religion cannot be legislated, anyone can say. True enough; neither can the neglect or scorn of religion, and for that matter, neither can scholarship be legislated. The man whose momentary spleen or laziness prompts him to say to the required observance, "What business have you to make me religious?" has the selfsame right—and all too frequent occasion—when the college course is over, to come back on his Alma Mater and say, "Why didn't you make me a scholar?" To which the college can only answer, "There are your opportunities, scholarly and religious, and if we, the college, choose not to put them at the mercy of uneasy sentiment, to maintain or abolish, perhaps in the long run you may find it was just as well to have something on which you could surely count, whether you would profit by it or not."

All this about surface sentiment, however, is not of my true subject, but a digression. It reveals the negative side, indeed, the disposition not to identify religion with routine; and in every community, college or other, are those who stop with the negative and will not go forward constructively to identify their religion—at least under that name—at all. What proportion of such there is at Amherst, no one can tell; we have to leave the question where St. Paul left it in his day, when, sure that "the firm foundation of God standeth," he could only point to its double seal, "The Lord knoweth them that are his," and, "Let everyone that nameth the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness." The true religious life at Amherst, its essential fiber, is a thing not of fluctuations and recoveries but of growth, the healthy growth of our expanding time, with relatively small admixture of its evils and paralyzing denials. Thirty years of conversance with it entitle me, I think, to say this with firm confidence. In our somewhat cloistered undergraduate life, out of the currents of religious controversies and criticisms, we are not in position minutely to prove all things; but neither have we suffered ourselves to stand still or fall behind; the disposition rather is to keep pace with the times, not in the attitude of denial or indifference, but holding fast that which is good, pre-eminently the good that

impinges upon life as we are living it, in the active, care-free, forward-looking period of youth. It is a religion not demonstrative in religious terms, and indeed reticent about calling itself religion at all, but habitually mindful of what belongs practically to the soundest manhood ideals.

To enlarge on this would be but to enlarge on the movement of the age itself. We all know what a tremendous transformation the last thirty years have witnessed in men's religious ideas. The double seal of St. Paul's "firm foundation of God" has appeared in wonderful enlargement and clarity of meaning. There have been revealed so many ways, outside of the dogmatic and ecclesiastical, of being in some authentic degree the Lord's, so many ways of departing from unrighteousness without joining the church or even naming the divine name, that men have almost lost their old-time church bearings, and deem that with the light and impulse they have they can shift for themselves. Of course in this, as in every strong movement, there is a myopic element; they are not giving the church its due; while at the same time they are translating the thing for which the church has always stood into business and social terms. Their Christ is the Son of Man who, if becoming less palpably historic, is becoming more identified with present manhood. And in the wholesome feeling of that identity manhood itself is being more deeply and tolerantly explored; manhood as projected to mankind, with universal brotherhood coming in sight. Such is the tremendous idea, or rather movement, which in our latest time is discovering its essential identity with religion. It is not the worship of man; it is rather the faith and hope and love of the highest, as expressed in human terms.

To respond by a cryptic sympathy to such an age-pulsation as this, and to give it expression in the college idiom, must result of course in a very different atmosphere and tone of things from what used to prevail in the old-time evangelistic and prayer-laden days of the church. Different, I say; whether more or less congenial to religion can be determined only when the broader definition of religion, now evolving, stands out clear and full. Meanwhile some of the venerable religious customs and expressions have atrophied and disappeared. Not many years ago the stated

weekly prayer-meeting died, not without causing pain to many, as if a safeguard of religious life were removed. Fast-day, a long-established observance, is only a dim tradition; and the annual day of prayer for colleges is rapidly becoming such. It cannot be ascertained that the discontinuance of these quasi-official institutions was owing in any smallest degree to an invasion of unfaith or impiety. And in their place a vigorous Young Men's Christian Association, with a resident graduate secretary, is devoting itself to a variety of organized Christian work, in the way of boys' clubs, neighborhood preaching and teaching, evening classes, work among foreigners, study of missions, inquiry into social conditions and settlement work, and the like—the list is too long to name. In all these voluntary activities the most striking thing, as compared with old times, is what may be called the reversal of the spiritual current: instead of laboring to secure their own personal salvation, the effort is to save others, nor that alone, as if it were passing the desire for salvation a step farther along the line, but to make others in their turn saviors and helpers. It is a reversal from the inward and self-regarding current to the outward and dynamic, as expressed in the impulse to service and brotherliness. The fact that these activities so largely take social, educational, and athletic forms, instead of evangelistic, is not to be urged seriously against them; these forms are in fact coming to be the practical religion of the age, and the young men are in encouraging degree responding to the influence.

Space would not permit me to enumerate the noble personal influences that throughout Amherst's history have wrought to keep the religious allegiance sound and true, nor is it in the power of language adequately to estimate it. To name the older names—Stearns, Seelye, Tyler, Crowell—leaving others out, would run the risk of being invidious; to mention names of men still at their post, a steady inspiring and constructive power, would not be to their desire or taste. Yet two names, however, of men recently removed by death, must not go unmentioned: Professor Garman, of rare teaching genius, whose philosophy, still perpetuated, is pre-eminently a Christian philosophy; and Dr. Hitchcock, venerable counselor and comrade, whose labors in physical education were

emphatically a religion put into manly health and action. Their works do follow them. We see it in the general tone of manliness, courtesy, refinement of demeanor, honor in class and game, regard for highest values in idea and fact, and not least, a healthy resiliency of spirit, which brings men back from the occasional lapses and mistakes which occur in all college communities to the saner view and resolve. How truly these have their springs in a deep-laid religious principle need not be subject of inquiry; they speak for themselves. Such are not fruits of a perverse or un-Christian spirit.

One thing, however, you will not find at Amherst. If there is any person conspicuous by his absence, it is the religious prig. The student does not cherish his religion, such as he has, for show or for market value. The Pharisaic, or the tenderly pious, or those whose religion has only a Biblical vocabulary, might not easily discover that he has any religion at all. It certainly is not greatly in evidence in a college yell, or at a bonfire. Nor much more demonstrative it is, at least under that name, in personal profession. The reaction against whatever smacks of the self-righteous, or the hypocrite, or the ascetic saint, makes it slow to assert itself. But this does not necessarily connote scorn or depravity; it is just as likely to coexist with the cherishing of a sacred treasure too precious to be handled and pawed about for public exhibition. One can respect such a feeling; one can forgive the man if by a kind of inverted hypocrisy he poses for worse than he is. For the very pose may be the homage of the consciously imperfect to an ideal too great to measure. And into such an ideal the religion of our age, overflowing the old creedal and ecclesiastical limits, is expanding.

On the whole, the steadfast sentiment that seems to prevail at Amherst, that lies hidden under student joys and gaieties, and that reasserts itself after fluctuations of mood have come and gone, is that religion is simply the highest value of life, a calm dynamic to be applied, not to remote dogmas and speculations, but to the duty that lies nearest and the ideal that rises clearest.